

The Sleazy Narrator

I argued earlier that sleaze is marked in a way that reveals the maker's cynical nature; therefore it is a matter of meaning, interpretation, most often cued by form. In other words, understanding it depends both on the text itself, and a reading of the maker's intent by the audience. This is of course at variance from critical traditions which stress analyzing the text in itself without regard for intention and effect. But sleaze short-circuits that stance. In contrast to the unintentionally camp paracinema, which is often inept but sincere (with the gap between intention and ability providing the irony and humor). The classic example is Ed Wood's *Glen or Glenda* where the maker's obsessive concern to portray male transvestism as normal, socially acceptable, and in no way related to homosexuality collides with clumsy and cheap filmmaking technique. There is a vanity and self-love obvious and present which (being a recognizable human trait) invites a kind of indulgent scorn, amusement at its blind earnestness, not really an audience anger. In contrast, the deliberate trash stance of *Pink Flamingoes* (Waters) or *The Devil's Cleavage* (Kuchar and) provides a strong sense of the filmmaker's own delight in being bad, violating norms of good taste, and general outrageousness and invites the audience to play along.

In contrast, the authorial presence, the "voice of documentary" in the sleazy documentaries I'm discussing here reveal their cynical and mercenary intent largely through the voice over or on-screen narrators themselves. The films break down in terms of not proving themselves as devoted to either art or instruction. Rather, they invite viewing as "mere" entertainment, but through their own ineptness (massive in *Wishman*), seem to be asking for it, to be laughed at rather than laughed with. The audience then senses this as a problem. At best, such narration can be good-humored, as in *Teenage Sex Fantasies* with the initial suggestion to discharge and Rene Bond's proudly giving a hand (and mouth) to the goal.

The usual case against the voice over narrator, particularly by the direct cinema documentarians, is that it dominates the visuals, that it forces its reading on the audience (and thus in a Bazinian sense is undemocratic). It is thus not only authoritative but authoritarian. Yet it thus contains the seeds of its own critique. For coming to terms with authority is a basic component of human development. While the child early on understands the vice of authority (first parental, then the teacher) is powerful and calls for respect, it is also the case that life experience teaches the child a sense of justice and forms of rebellion against authoritarian voices, as when the child believes the voice is dishonest and motivated by its own convenience at the child's expense. "this is for your own good" is the starting point for resentment.

Similarly, narrative voice can be undercut. As we saw with the *March of Time* case, ridicule can result. Orson Welles provides a good example, from his initial radio role as The Radio Announcer in Archibald McLeish's radio drama *The Fall of the City*, (fact check details) at the end of his career he served as a ____ figure

endlessly interviewed on television with extreme deference to his legendary genius and how he was punished by Hollywood. This legend contrasted with his work as a pitchman for a wine company, as his deep voice assured us that this firm would “sell no wine before its time,” to the point where it became a joke line. Similarly the authority and voice quality resonance of some familiar older actors is exploited in television commercials using Donald Sutherland, Gene Hackman, James Earl Jones and Tommy Lee Jones. But this itself can backfire, as for example when Tommy Lee Jones pitches for SBC, a telephone service provider and local phone company with notorious bad service. The public everyday knowledge of repeated problems belies the actor’s attempts to reassure the audience about SBCs dedication and commitment.